

IN SEARCH OF HOME: JOURNEYING ACROSS NATION SPACE AND BEYOND IN TONI MORRISON'S *HOME*

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ABSTRACT

Home making is such a complex process for African Americans that they have to move across different spatial scales in order to make home possible for them. This movement, whether forced or intentional, helps them spatialize their idea of home which they constantly carry with them. Consequently, they have to deal with multiple homes and identities. The legacy of slavery keeps on haunting them and memory plays a vital role in evoking past trauma in the present when exposed to a similar situation which is easily available in post-slavery and post-colonial America. The paper seeks to explore Toni Morrison's representation of this predicament in her novel Home so as to facilitate a better understanding of the text.

KEYWORDS: *Home, Space, Journey, Nation, Beyond & Memory*

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INTRODUCTION

The 'homing desire' of African Americans is constantly thwarted by the legacy of slavery kept alive through 'personal memory', 'collective memory' and 'cultural memory'. Personal memory denotes the retaining and recalling of past experiences of an individual which has the propensity for becoming a part of the collective memory of a group or community. With the passage of time collective memory gives way to cultural memory in the form of "texts, images, rites, [songs], buildings, monuments, cities, or even landscapes" (Assmann 128). The spacio-temporal dimension of this transition is epitomized in the placing of temporal events in spatial matrix thereby demonstrating the interaction between personal and collective and/or cultural memories, which determine community bond in the present.

The trauma of slavery and its aftermath retained in personal as well as collective memory of African Americans become manifested in their attempt either to repress or bring back past trauma. Morrison's conception of '(re)-memory' also refers to the interplay of personal and collective memories in reconfiguring past trauma in spatial matrix. Morrison's (re)-memory thus focuses on the possibility of recollecting past trauma by trauma victims in the present when exposed to a situation akin to the one experienced by their ancestor(s). Re-memory leads them to react in a manner which is reminiscent of the reaction on the part of their ancestors while, at the same time, different from that as well. Consequently (re)-memory makes the past undergo a filtering through the present thereby encouraging trauma victims to look forward to a future which is fluid having multiple possibilities.

African Americans are destined to be in a constant move from one place to another in response to the dictates of their white masters and sometimes, in response to their inner urge to take up a journey across different spatial scales to escape oppression and exploitation. In the course of such journeys, they become experienced and matured enough to materialize their search for home which has so far been eluding them. However, due to such

continuous mobility across spatial scales these people do not have fixed homes and identities. Consequently, they have to keep on carrying their idea of home and identity with them and shape them according to the demand of the present situation as well as the evocation of past trauma from memory. The spacio-temporal dimensions of such journeys make possible a deconstruction of black/white binaries and a looking forward to a viable home for them.

Toni Morrison's *Home* describes the journeys undertaken by Frank and Cee in search of home denied to them in their grandparents' house in Lotus, Georgia. In fact, their journey began much earlier when their family, along with other black folks, was displaced from their original home in Texas. This forced dislocation and an equally unwarranted relocation in their relative's family in Lotus brought about an imbalance in the family life making it dysfunctional. In that house they were debarred from attaining self consciousness and, as a result, they assessed themselves from other's perspectives. Neglected by the family, Frank and Cee "navigated the silence and tried to imagine a future" (*Home* 53). Their journey to the unknown is facilitated by such neglects, which are the byproducts of racism.

The journey for African Americans normally begins with their forced displacement from their homes. Frank Money's dislocation from his home in Texas affects a series of relocations in different places multiplying his identity. His multiple identities are formed as a result of and in response to the manifestation of slavery and racism in the mid-twentieth century American South. Displacement make African Americans homeless and vulnerable and they in turn have to put up a resistance to such appropriation of space by imagining and creating new homes for them, or by reclaiming and returning to their old homes.

DISCUSSIONS

African Americans are not expected and/or allowed to stay in a particular place for a long time, which means journeying across spaces is the destiny of these people. Homelessness as well as penury, therefore, is a frequent and common trait of their way of life:

You could be inside, living in your own house for years, and still, men with or without badges but always with guns could force you, your family, and your neighbors to pack up and move— with or without shoes (*Home* 9).

Their frequent dislocations and relocations demand flexibility in their attempt to adapt to different situations and places. Whether wished for or not, they will have to adjust themselves with the new conditions, and, in the process, they acquire an ability to adopt "an oppositional world-view" (*Yearning* 149). Memory and re-memory contribute to acquiring such ability, particularly when journeys are undertaken due to forced displacement. These journeys only convince them that America is not yet free from racism. In *Home* Morrison uses and reuses certain images such as "barefoot", that is "without shoes", to bring home the residues of the legacy of slavery and racism that still haunt the African American. Repetition of such images throughout different temporal and spatial state of affairs evokes, what Morrison calls, "re-memory", which attests to the recurring residuum of colonialism in neocolonial America or, what Derek Gregory calls, in "the colonial present" (Colonial Present, XV).

Cee's journey begins while she was in her mother's womb—a forced displacement of her family from Texas to Lotus, Georgia. But her actual journey begins with her elopement with a good-for-nothing handsome guy called Prince, who "had married her for an automobile" and who abandoned her homeless and hopeless in the City of Atlanta. Now Cee can neither go back to Lotus, Georgia, nor is she accommodated in Atlanta. She desperately needs "to talk to her brother". Her city experience has not yet made her mature enough to decide on matters of urgency without embarking on the advice

of somebody else (e.g. her brother): "He would, as always, protect her from a bad situation" (*Home* 49, 50, 51). Cee's journey, culminating in her surrender to Dr. Beau and his performing of medical experiments on her black body, offers her a space for getting matured enough to redefine herself later. In their journey back home Frank and Cee could have the glimpse of the healing power of traditional black herbal therapy, which got the better of modern western treatment, and the rejuvenating power of community life. The dismemberment of her body by a white doctor is a traumatic experience, the healing of which lies in the nurturing atmosphere of community life. It is also through her journey that Cee could realize the negative consequences of lack of parental nurturing and debilitating effects of overprotecting love of a brother. After her recovery, therefore, Cee refuses to depend on her brother for protection and making decisions.

The materiality of the body is as important as or, even more important than, the idea of the body as home. Manipulation of Cee's body in *Home* and exploitation of Sethe's body in *Beloved*, for instance, resemble the appropriation of colonial space by the colonizer. Just as space is appropriated for the benefit of the white (colonizers), the black body is appropriated for the betterment of the white body. The results of the research conducted in the black body will benefit the white. The surgical eugenic experiments conducted on Cee's body with the help of western form of medicine are, however, counteracted by traditional natural therapy practiced by the black community in Lotus. The mutilation of Cee's body and her subsequent recovery from bodily disorder under the care of the black women in Lotus, make her mature enough to stand all by herself without relying on her brother's protective but authoritative care:

"Meantime her brother was there with her, which was very comforting, but she didn't need him as she had before. He had literally saved her life, but she neither missed nor wanted his fingers at the nape of her neck telling her not to cry, that everything would be alright. Some things, perhaps, but not everything" (*Home* 131).

But the black body can also provide an alternative space to the safe and protective domestic space. Frank in *Home*, for instance, gets his home in the company and body of his beloved Lily. He describes his sexual experience with her (which is not less than the experience of creating home) in terms of an erotic symbol of "entering what he called the kingdom between her legs" (*Home* 21). The black body houses all the paraphernalia of the tragedy of being and becoming black. History can be written and stored on the body. History can also be written from the body. Apart from that, history and society can be spatialized on the body. In *Beloved* Morrison converts Sethe's body into a text with the marks of whipping on her back made conspicuous by her description of them in the novel. Similarly, the incident of the stealing of milk from Sethe's body by the Schoolteacher's nephews lends another dimension to the body as home and text. Sethe's body is interpreted differently by different characters in the novel, and Paul D in particular, is reminded of physical and psychological torture the black body and mind are subjected to by the supremacist white culture.

Frank's memories of Lotus and Korea came on the way of developing a sustainable relationship with his beloved Lily in the city. Frank was never nostalgic about going back to Lotus. In Lotus he looked for a home in vain. He went to "Korea, Kentucky, San Diego, Seattle" in search of a home. He failed to have a viable and sustainable home in either of these places. He lost his two best friends, Mike and Stuff in the Korean War and was haunted by the horrible memory of killing a Korean girl. When he was almost homeless, he found his home in the company of Lily: "I felt like I'd come home. Finally, I'd been wandering. Not totally homeless, but close" (*Home* 29, 68). But the relationship did not last long as he had to leave her for saving Cee's life. Like the hero of Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, who, after a long journey in quest of treasure, discovered it back home in his native place, both Frank and Cee find a home back in Lotus.

Frank's journey to Korea, his involvement in the Korean War, his coming back to Georgia to save his sister, and

his rediscovery of the black community of Lotus as welcoming to him and his sister, are some of the experiences Frank has to undergo in the process of his undertaking the journey. Initially, he felt nervous having to kill somebody in the battlefield. But after the death of his best friend Mike, he did not hesitate to kill his enemies in the battlefield. After experiencing that trauma of witnessing the death of his friend from very near, “smell of blood” could no longer upset him. It rather increased his appetite for more blood (*Home* 98). But after the war, Frank was completely transformed into a different person who was happy to be able to rescue his sister from Dr. Beau without resorting to violence. So, it means, Frank came back to Lotus as a completely different person—a transformed personality shaped and moulded by the experiences he gathered during his journey. Now, he would perhaps assess the black community in Lotus from a new perspective. Cee has also got matured and transformed positively after her experience in Dr. Beau’s house as well as in the midst of the women belonging to the black community of Lotus.

Initially, Frank had a negative view about Lotus. He, along with his sister and his buddies, hated the place for three reasons—“its unforgiving population, its isolation, and especially its indifference to the future” (*Home* 16). This view about Georgia, acquired through their experience in Lotus, was supported by the waitress in Booker’s diners:

“Georgia?” the waitress shouted. “I got people in Macon. No good memories about that place. We hid in an abandoned house for half a year.”

“Hid from what? White sheets?”

“Naw. The rent man.”

“Why him?”

“Oh, please. It was 1938” (28).

Frank and his two best friends decided to leave Lotus and join the army because its environment was not conducive to a better future. But after the recovery of Cee under the care and treatment of Miss Ethel and her women, Frank started reviewing his ideas about Lotus, and “he could not believe how much he had once hated this place” (132). Now, this place appeared healthy and safe.

By the time Frank was sitting on the train to Atlanta, the nightmarish memories of the battlefield lost their intensity on him and they were well under his control. They could no longer “throw him into paralyzing despair” (*Home* 100). His calmness and sobriety were somewhat restored. But the thrill of fighting as one of the means for asserting one’s personal existence in the world was still rampant on him. His fight with Sonny perhaps restored the old Lotus guy in him who was ever ready to protect his sister even if it required the display of physical strength. Frank’s postmortem of this fight focuses on the difference between the “violence” in the battlefield and the “excitement” of this fight:

“Once seated, Frank wondered at the excitement, the wild joy the fight had given him. It was unlike the rage that had accompanied killing in Korea. Those sprees were fierce but mindless, anonymous. This violence was personal in its delight. Good, he thought. He might need that thrill to claim his sister” (102).

Yet, he was fully satisfied when he was able to rescue Cee from Dr. Beau’s house without resorting to violence. The white always nurture the delusion that the black can be brought under control by a manifest display of violence and that they can be dealt with only through the application of force. But such black/white binary can be negotiated through a reimagining of a ‘hybrid space’ where violence can be done away with the initiation of the concept of non-violence in their

dealing with each other. Frank Money's satisfaction at his not having to resort to violence in rescuing Cee from Dr. Beau is a case in point. Frank's journey to take part in Korean War and his traumatic experiences there were instrumental in shunning violence in his dealing with Dr. Beau in spite of the doctor's violence against Cee. This was no longer the same Frank, who reacted violently to the boy who was following Cee to the woods in Lotus with insidious intention.

Frank Money's journey across and beyond America provides him the opportunity to assess his own position and predicament as an African American. This also reveals African Americans' constant quest for identity and home, which are still eluding them. Frank's search for home takes him from one place to another, from one person to another, and from one situation to another. Sometimes, he looks for a home in the body of a woman like Lily, in the company of her sister Cee, and ultimately in the support of the black community in Lotus. Accordingly, his identity changes with the temporal and spatial shift affected by his constant movement from one place to another. Frank Money's identity shifts from a brother to a war veteran, to a lover and, finally, to a re-inducted member of the black community (in Lotus). But what affects and conjoins his multiple identities is the realization that he is an "Other"—an African American destined to be deprived of the privileges enjoyed by white Americans. His quest for home is also influenced by such identity crises. Similarly, Cee also constructs different identities through her elopement with Prince to Atlanta only to be deserted by the latter, her getting a job in Dr. Beau's house and the latter's performing of eugenic experiments on her black body, and her rescue by Frank leading to her return to Lotus. Like her brother, Cee also realizes the vulnerability caused by the "blackness" and "otherness" of being an African American in the United States. Her quest for home continues and constantly eludes her because of her identity crises, and the inter-relationship between the two is made manifest throughout her journey from Lotus to Atlanta and, then, back to Lotus again.

Frank and his two friends left Lotus to join the Army (integrated army) because the place failed to fulfill their aspirations. It did not of course, take him long to realize that African Americans are destined to face discrimination anywhere in America. Their sacrifices in the Korean War were never recognized, and they were not welcomed as war-veterans. He was rather made to leave the hospital without shoes and with the possibility of getting arrested because of that. However, journeys like the ones undertaken by Frank foreground the myth and reality of black/white binary. Reverend Locke tells Frank, "An integrated army is integrated misery. You all go fight, come back, they treat you like dogs. They treat dogs better" (*Home* 18). But from his first hand experience of war Frank realized that such general comments are guilty of mythopoeia:

"The army hadn't treated him so bad. It wasn't their fault he went ape every now and then. As a matter of fact the discharge doctors had been thoughtful and kind, telling him the craziness would leave in time. They knew all about it, but assured him it would pass. Just stay away from alcohol, they said, which he didn't. Couldn't" (18).

Frank's journey also acquaints him with black people who helped him in different ways to make his journey possible. The pain of segregation and discrimination experienced by African American travelers in the wider public space is somewhat abated by their encounter with the black community. They also become more knowledgeable as a result of such meeting. For example, Reverend Locke and Jean, the "gentle couple" offered him money to make possible his journey up to Chicago. This generous family helped Frank not only in cash but also in kinds. Jean, in particular, gave him a grocery bag that had contained "six sandwiches, some cheese, some bologna, and three oranges" (*Home* 17, 18). She gave all these items to Frank to eat during his journey. Explaining the importance of the food items for Frank in his journey, Locke tries to demystify his guest about harbouring any illusion about the essential difference between North and South:

“You’ll be grateful for every bite since you won’t be able to sit down any bus stop counter. Listen here, you from Georgia and you been in a desegregated army and may be you think up North is way different from down South. Don’t believe it and don’t count on it. Custom is just as real as law and can be just as dangerous” (19).

Apart from them, Reverend Maynard provided him the much needed information about the names and locations of hotels and restaurants to complete the journey. As soon as he started walking to the train station, he was relieved of his nervousness and was regaining confidence. It appears as if the closer he approached Georgia, his mind was relieved of nightmares he had so far been haunted with.

Frank’s journey also made him knowledgeable and critical about the illusion harboured by African-Americans about the possibility of converting the northern cities to their home. When, for example, Frank got on a bus near Fort Lawton and got off at the next stop in order to get into the bathroom at “a Chevron station” to pee, “the sign on the door stopped him” (*Home* 23). Morrison does not tell us what was written on the sign board, but we can very easily surmise that the bathroom was perhaps meant for the white only. This shows that the city is not welcoming to African Americans, nor can it provide a home for them, unless they are ready to accept the norms of the city upheld by the supremacist white culture. That the city space is not safe for them is exemplified by the incident of a black couple being assaulted and thrown out of a coffee house. The husband got off the train at Elko and asked for coffee or something which infuriated the owner and the customers as well. They started kicking him seeing which the wife came for his help only to get “a rock thrown in her face” (25). But such experiences of segregation and insult are counteracted by black owned hotels and restaurants such as Booker’s diner where black people could feel comfortable and homely:

“Booker’s was not only a good and cheap place to eat but its company—diners, counter help, waitresses, and a loud argumentative cook—was welcoming and high spirited. Laborers and the idle, mothers and street women, all ate and drank with the ease of family in their own kitchens” (27).

In such places, segregation practiced by the white is subverted to the extent of converting the margin to a space of integration. Like Bill Cooney’s hotel and Resort in *Love*, Booker’s diner is a place where memory and re-memory are evoked to pave the way for counteraction and reconciliation. Here in this hotel customers recollected, discussed and even made fun of their harsh days in the thirties:

Up and down the counter there was laughter, loud and knowing. Some began to compete with stories of their own deprived life in the thirties.

Me and my brother slept in a freight car for a month.

Where was it headed?

Away, was all we knew.

You ever sleep in a coop the chickens wouldn’t enter?

Aw, man, shut up. We lived in a ice house.

Where was the ice?

We ate it.

Get out!

I slept on so many floors, first time I saw a bed I thought it was a coffin (*Home* 28-29).

This hotel provides them a space for verbalizing and sharing their trauma. Such articulation is not possible in the white dominated spaces where there is restriction on voicing the ordeals African Americans are made to undergo.

Frank's journey also introduced him to the brutality of white cops, who did not hesitate to shoot an eight year old black boy only because he was playing with a toy pistol. This boy was Arlene, son of Billy Watson. Seeing him pointing his toy pistol here and there, some novice cop shot at his right arm causing it to droop at his side. These cops are at liberty to shoot "anything they want" because Chicago, as stated by Billy Watson, is "a mob city" (*Home* 31). Cee's journey to Atlanta and her staying at Dr. Beau's house also introduced her to the brutality of the white doctor, who started eugenic experiments on her black body sending her almost to the threshold of death and making her a barren woman. All these incidents show the difficulties associated with African Americans' search for home through journey. These urban spaces turn out to be detrimental to fulfilling their hopes of creating a noble home for them.

When Cee recovered completely under the care of the group of black women in Lotus, she realized that Lotus is home for her: "I ain't going nowhere, Miss Ethel. This is where I belong" (126). Frank, who did not have a good opinion about Lotus and its people, was surprised at what Ethel and the other black women had done to Cee—"They delivered unto him a Cee who would never again need his hand over her eyes or his arms to stop her murmuring bones" (128). He has perhaps realized that Lotus has changed or that he has now been able to understand the importance of community help and love, which he either ignored or did not try to understand. That the black community in Lotus has always been of great help to anybody in distress is evident from the response given to Lenore by the black women when the former was bed-ridden after she had suffered from a minor stroke. These women brought her foods, swept the floors, washed her clothes, and they were even ready to bath her, although "her pride and their sensitivity forbade it" (92). They did all these in spite of the fact that Lenore hated them all. Cee hinted at these qualities of the neighbors when she said that apart from Lenore, every neighbor "was stern but quickly open-minded" (46). These people were always ready to share their foods with one another and help strangers, particularly when they are absconders.

Miss Ethel Fordham taught Cee that without restoring self-esteem, home cannot be made possible. Cee felt that her self-esteem could have been restored, had her mother assured her that she "wasn't born in no gutter" as branded by Lenore. Cee's journey taught her that she must become the woman able to rescue herself without any help from others: "Not from Lenore through the lies of the Rat, not from Dr. Beau through the courage of Sarah and her brother" (*Home* 129). In this respect, Cee certainly is moved by Ethel's advice that she must feel that she is free, and that she is not going to allow anybody to decide who she is because that is "slavery". Ethel makes her locate the free person inside her to "do some good in the world" (*Home* 126) and to make home possible for her in Lotus with "these people" (129).

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, on his journey across America and beyond, Frank encounters events and situations replete with violence associated with racism and sexism. These experiences make him recollect his childhood and wartime trauma. He realizes that he is not alone in experiencing trauma of this kind; that sharing of such traumas with other members of the black community consolidates his sense of solidarity with the community. All these and his commitment to save the life of his sister motivate him to get back to Georgia. Delivering Cee to the strict vigil and care of the community, Frank heaves a sigh of relief and feels that his wartime trauma no longer keeps coming to his mind with the crippling power it once had.

Earlier Cee ascribed his dumbness and stupidity to her “lack of schooling” (129), but after her encounter with Ethel and her brigade of black women, who were illiterate, she realized that the cause lay somewhere else. She detected it as lack of parental care on the one hand, and overpowering brotherly care on the other. Both contributed to her failure to mature and get defeated in every step she had taken in her quest for home. But the journey she had undertaken was necessary for making her the person she became—a self-confident and decisive woman resolved to make Lotus her home with or without the care of her brother, and to earn a living by making quilt for visitors “in Jeffery, Mount Haven” (127). Finally, both Frank and Cee are reunited and they are reincorporated into the community fold facilitating thereby an environment conducive to completing their process of reconstruction of self and a viable home.

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